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ABSTRACT

Small, rural schools may have a limited range of services available onsite for students with intensive special needs. This report describes the philosophical approaches and situational strategies for these students, implemented successfully by staff at two small rural schools in Maine. Small rural schools have the most difficulty in programming for students who require more than 60 percent of the day in a special setting, or an alternative curriculum in several domains. Often, alternative day programs within a reasonable distance may be limited or nonexistent, and the school may have only one part-time or full-time special educator on staff. Thus, multidisciplinary teams within the school are under pressure to develop creative programming. Three approaches are important in developing a program for a new student with intensive needs. These are a family-focused approach characterized by mutual respect, choices, and active family participation in team decision making; a comprehensive data collection system; and adult support in the classroom. Effective programming also depends on situational strategies related to personnel, financial factors, the school facility, and preexisting school culture. Situational strategies are intermediate steps as an appropriate level of staffing and programming is determined. A strong team effort in a small school can accomplish a lot for a student and his or her family in a short time. This is significant, as students with intensive needs who enroll in rural schools as transfer students mid-year are likely to move again. (SV)

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RESPONSIVE SPECIAL EDUCATION PARTNERSHIPS: DEALING WITH THE TOUGH CASES IN SMALL RURAL SCHOOLS

An advantage of small, rural schools is that when a new student with special needs enrolls, the principal, classroom teacher and special education staff immediately initiate communication about the student. Other special service providers are soon brought into the communication loop and staff work together to obtain information from parents and previous schools. Few new students are "lost between the cracks'" in a school where every staff member supervises every student in the school at some time during the week in a classroom, on the playground, or in the cafeteria. However, a disadvantage of small, rural schools is that they usually have a limited range of services available onsite for students with intensive needs, who require more than "resource" support. How can small, rural schools respond effectively to implement programming for such students? In this monograph, philosophical approaches and situational strategies implemented successfully by staff at two small rural schools in northern New England will be shared. During the conference session, examples of the strategies and outcomes will be provided through a case (Figure 1-see next page).

Service Delivery in Small Rural Schools

According to state regulations for IDEA, resource class placement is defined as specialized instruction and support services for 21%-60% of a student's school day (Maine Special Education Team). Many small rural schools depend heavily on a flexible resource room model in which a resource teacher, often assisted by educational technicians, serves students for short periods of time either through pull-out services in the resource room or support in the general education classroom. To enable most students to reach their IEP goals and become independent learners, the "least restrictive environment" includes some combination of both types of services (pull-out & support in the regular classroom) (Schmidt & Harriman, 1998).

Students who require more than 60% of the day in a special setting, or an alternative curriculum in several domains, are the most difficult to program for adequately in small, rural schools. Often the availability of alternative day programs within a reasonable distance of the child's home is limited or non-existent. Likewise, there may only be one part-time or full-time special educator on staff in the school, limiting the different types of programs that can be offered daily. Thus, there is often more pressure on multidisciplinary teams to develop creative solutions to programming within the community school (Harriman, 1998).

Philosophical Approaches

Three approaches are important for assuring conditions under which a team can mobilize and successfully implement a program for a new student with intensive special needs. They include: a family focus, a data collection system, and adult support in the classroom.

Family focus

A family focused approach is based on two indisputable assumptions:

1.) families care about the well-being of their children
2.) families can expect school teams to help increase their ability to meet their children's developmental needs.

A family focused approach is characterized by mutual respect, choices, and active participation of parents/family members in team decision-making (National Center for Family-Centered Care, 1990). In public schools it is the responsibility of the principal to set the tone for a family focused approach. Direct service providers may ally with the student and disapprove of parental responses. The principal can remind colleagues that parents are

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doing the best they can and challenge educators to come up with resources/actions to enhance the family's strategies for supporting the child. Special educators can allow adequate time in team meetings or parent conferences for discussion of circumstances that are constraining the family's ability to support a student's learning outside of school. School staff can also facilitate a family's access to other community services via the school counselor or social worker.

In the case of students with intensive special needs, the family focused approach is particularly important. Often parents are struggling at home to cope with behavior management or skills for daily living. Family members may also be struggling with their own "special" medical, economic, or emotional needs. Connecting the family to additional resources beyond the school may alleviate some of the stress that is impacting the family as a whole. The goal is to "enable and empower families in a way that makes them more competent and better able to mobilize...intrafamily and extrafamily resources, which in turn promotes child, parent, and family functioning," (Dunst, Trivette & Deal, 1988, p. 3) Often, other agencies that the family becomes involved with also offer case management services which can significantly enhance the effects of school services.

It should be noted that a family focused approach is not a valid excuse for relinquishing responsibility for a student's progress at school. It is primarily educators' responsibility to provide a safe, positive learning environment for students while they are at school. It is primarily the parents' responsibility to provide a safe, positive, healthy environment for students all of the rest of the time. Judging or attributing blame for a student's difficulties usually is not productive. The extent to which educators and parents can constructively work in partnership, encourage each other, and access resources/information to help each other is directly related to a student's prognosis.

Data Collection

Systematic data collection is a well-established indicator of effective special education programs. In small, rural schools, many team members may have frequent opportunities to directly interact with a student. This may result in over-reliance on personal observations, perceptions, or opinions for making team decisions. Systematically recording data on a student's behavior, and adult responses to it, is crucial for assessing adequacy and effectiveness of intervention strategies (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Bahr, 1990).

The more challenging the student, the more important it is to have reliable data sources to guide decisions. Conversely, the more challenging the student, the higher the demands on human resources just to maintain the student. When adult resources are stretched to the maximum providing constant supervision for the student and intensive case management demands, it is difficult to justify time spent passively collecting data, However, there are alternatives to the traditional objective observer's systematic recording of behavior. Behavioral/instructional interventions can be structured so that data collection on performance is an integral part of the process carried out by the teacher, counselor, or educational technician working with a student (Paris, et. al, 1992). Rating forms or checklists that can be completed at the end of each day by teachers or parents are another alternative. Anecdotal notes are also critical for later communication with case managers or family service workers with regard to crisis situations that may have occurred.

Adult Support in Classroom

When educational and behavioral support is primarily provided through pull-out services in a school, service providers tend to be extremely schedule bound. They also may not be as sensitive to the needs of newly enrolled students because they have limited opportunities to work directly in classrooms with teachers. When educational and behavioral support is primarily provided through a combination of pull-out and "inclusive" support in general education classrooms, support staff and teachers tend to quickly identify specific needs of newly enrolled students. If every classroom teacher in the school has some additional adult assistance, there is less apt to be lag time between enrollment and referral.

Figure 1. Building a Program for Jason, 9/00-1/01

DATA COLLECTION	FAMILY FOCUS	ADULT SUPPORT IN CLASSROOM
9/99 Records of previous evaluations sought from Preschool Providers	10/99 + Initial parent conference with teacher	9/99 + Title I in K-2 multiage class (40 mins. day)
10/99 Observations by principal & resource teacher	+ Initiate school - home daily notes	10/99 + Title I small group instruction for K students (2 hours day)
11/00 School counselor contacts Preschool Providers	11/99 Initial team meeting with family	11/99 Instructional Support Team Referral
11/99 Lead screening results obtained	12/00 + Help mother find childcare	12/99 +Self-contained, small K class, portable classroom (3.25 hours day)
12/99 –1/00 Psychoeducational Assessment	12/00 1/00 + Resource teacher establishes relationship with mother	12/99 + School Counselor inclass (30 mins. week)
1/00 Start anecdotal notebook in office	2/00 Team Meeting + Provide 1-2-3- tape to parents + Daily behavior monitoring forms home	12/99 + Consultation/observation by Resource Teacher
2/00 Determine eligibility for Spec. Ed. (Emotionally Disabled	4/00 + Referral to Human Services	2/00 + Ed. technician, (full K day, (3 hrs 45 mins)
2/00 Daily behavior monitoring form initiated	4/00 Team Meeting - mother and step father + Implement constructive contingency strategies home & school	9/00 + Resource Staff coteach (full day)
3/00 Evaluation by pediatrician	4/00 + Community Concepts Caseworker assigned	+ Resource room (1 hr day + time-out as needed)
3/00 Tracking of time-outs & duration	12/00 +Parent conference, discuss move and custody change	10/00 + School Counselor play therapy (30 mins. week)
5/00 Evaluation by pediatric neurologist	12/00 + Initial contact with father about transition	11/00 + Articulation therapy (60 mins. per week)
10/00 Evaluation by Speech Therapist	1/01 + Facilitate counseling referral with father	1/01 Transition Team in new school agrees to continue full time support
	1/01 + Attend transition PET with father	

The adult support in the classroom can be from a special educator, Title I assistant, a language specialist, or other professional. The role expectations for adult support in the classroom are also important. Cook & Friend describe several configurations for coteaching by classroom teachers and special services staff. In the most commonly used, "one teach, one support" the classroom teacher leads instruction in the class and the additional adult circulates assisting students individually as needed. However, other configurations fit many classrooms, also. Station teaching, in which different adults are assigned to small groups throughout the room works well in primary classrooms with learning centers or during reading instruction. Parallel teaching, in which the teacher and another adult divide the class to each teach the same lesson at the same time to half the students works well in multigrade classrooms.

Regardless of the configuration used, communication between the classroom teacher and the special services support person is essential. Sharing observations of students' patterns of learning and rate of progress facilitates timely referrals/modifications in programming. Ongoing communication and collaboration can also provide important emotional support for the classroom teacher who is trying to cope with the demands posed by a student with intensive special needs (Thousand, & Villa, 1992). Last, when more than one adult is present in the classroom, the impact of an individual student's behavior on the entire class can be more easily mitigated.

In combination, these three philosophical approaches can equip a small, rural school with the capacity to accommodate the needs of a student with intensive special needs without seriously compromising the educational service system for other students. In a practical sense this includes:

orient staff to approach their interactions with parents, including those of new enrollees, in a family focused manner;

work with special education, title I staff, and classroom teachers to develop efficient, simple record-keeping procedures for documenting student behavior and progress

provide all support services (special education, compensatory education, migrant education, speech & language services, occupational therapy services, etc.) through a combination of pull-out and in-class support, as appropriate, in order to increase the number of adults present in classrooms throughout the school day.

Situational Strategies

These three approaches provide a foundation, but there are also some specific strategies that are important in providing effective programming for students with intensive needs in small, rural schools. The reference to "situational" strategies is an acknowledgement that the effectiveness of these strategies is dependent upon situational factors that vary from school to school, and over time within a school. Situational factors include personnel, financial factors, the physical plant of the school, and the pre-existing culture/climate in a school. All of these strategies warrant consideration, but the best method of implementing each will require judgement by professionals who can objectively evaluate the situations unique to their school. Recommended strategies include:

enlist the active support of the principal
allocate staff time for extensive case management
cite safety issues to leverage resources
provide flexibility in staff scheduling
provide explicit training/staff development in appropriate strategies
invest in transition to the student's next school.

The active support of the principal is important for several reasons. First, keeping the principal in the loop allows her/him to apprise other administrators of the case as it develops. This communication alerts them that in advance of possible resource issues. Also, administrators appreciate having some background knowledge of a case when parents go to the principal or beyond the building level to express their concerns. Within the school, the principal is an important leader in setting a positive tone toward the student and his/her family. Listening to staff concerns and working with staff as a team to frequently evaluate the success of strategies – and capacity of the

school to provide adequate support for the student is a time consuming but important process. The teachers providing direct service need reassurance that their efforts are paying off when progress is evident - or help generating new strategies when it is not.

Additional case management time must be allocated for the special educator and classroom teacher or others who are heavily involved with the case. Likewise, staff should be encouraged to build schedules with enough flexibility to handle the frequent crises or added meetings that may be required to serve the student with intensive special needs. Time should also be allocated for onsite staff development, including explicit strategy training with modeling and practice. The principal can facilitate this through reallocation of staffing, scheduling, or additional resources. Sometimes something as simple as providing half day substitutes periodically can be useful. It is a tangible signal that the principal recognizes the extra demands being placed on staff.

All of these strategies are intermediate steps as an appropriate level of staffing and programming is determined. While mindful of the legal requirements of IDEA, sometimes special educators and administrators are reluctant to recommend additional staffing or services specifically for one student in a small school/community. The cost may seem out of proportion to the overall budget or the scale of services provided for other students. It's important to remember that the learning environment for all students in the school is at stake, also. In the case of a student with intensive special needs, often behavioral support is an important part of the program. Students' safety and the ability of staff to adequately serve all students are convincing arguments in justifying new staffing and program expenses.

Another frustration educators frequently encounter is mobility. Sometimes it seems that just as a student's program is fully implemented and the student is starting to make consistent progress, s/he moves again. Given the amount of time and energy that has been invested in developing an appropriate individual plan for the student, sending a staff member to a transition team meeting, or arranging for participation via a conference call, can be a worthwhile investment. Written records provide some history and documentation, but an educator who has worked directly with the student can listen to the concerns and questions of professionals at the new school, and share specific strategies, suggestions, and rationale for program decisions.

Summary

A strong team effort in a small school can accomplish a lot for a student and his/her family in a short time. This is significant, as students with intensive needs who enroll in rural schools as transfer students mid-year are likely to move again. Investments that increase a student's ability to interact constructively in a classroom environment can be generalized to a new school setting. If the team is also able to increase the family's awareness of the student's learning needs and how to better meet them, that knowledge or the services that have been accessed can also transfer to a new setting.

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